

## *Rummage to Bypass: Alternative Ways of Accessing the Archive*

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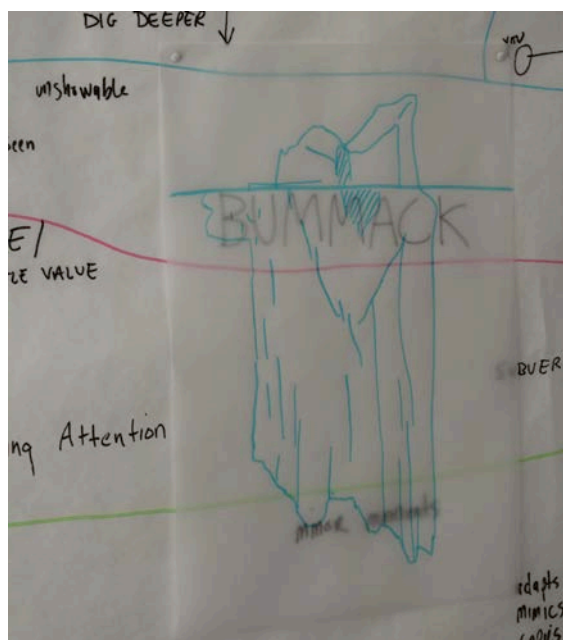
I am Danica Maier, an artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University, with a specialist research interest in drawing and textiles. My name is Andrew Bracey and I am an artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at University of Lincoln with a specialist research interest in painting and artist as curator.

Independently, we have both researched and created artwork for exhibitions in response to different collections that has led us to the instigation of the current project we are here to share with you. Also to mention there is a third co-investigator Dr. Sian Vaughan who is a trained art historian and holder of the archive at Birmingham City University, with a specialist interest in how artists interact and engage with archives.



We are here to discuss our ongoing project, *Bummock: New Artistic Responses to Unseen Parts of Archives* that uses artist residencies as case studies to develop new methods for researchers to access archives, different to current practice. We are currently in the research and development stages as well as engaged with a pilot project located in the Lace Archive in Nottingham Trent University. This is helping to develop and form part of a larger 5-year project.

As material based researchers we are deliberately bypassing the digital archive catalogue to directly access physical material. We are interested in what is lost of the materiality through the digital. As we are at the early stages we would value your thoughts and input to discuss issues about the digitised archive in relation to the project. So after a brief introduction of our project we'd like to use the remainder of our presentation time to engage in dialogue around key questions.



The bummock is the large hidden part of an iceberg, a metaphor for the archive in which much of the contents can remain unseen or uncatalogued. Traditionally the archive and its finding aids are directed towards historical enquiry and evidential value. Artists approach archives differently, with methods of enquiry that foreground materiality, performativity and the affect of archival materials. As Okwui Enwezor states in his catalogue essay to his curated exhibition, *Archive Fever*: “Artists interrogate the self-evidentiary claims of the archive by reading it against the grain.” We believe this way of ‘reading’ the archive against the grain by artist, as opposed to normal methodology can be useful for other disciplines. Bummock is a collaborative research project between artists, archives and researchers where we are investigating and developing different methods of access. We will establish models and ethical frameworks that can support artists, archive professionals, researchers and the public to use alternative methods of uncovering archives.

The hypotheses to be tested are:

- 1: that there are alternative ways to access an archive to uncover unseen things that normal routes will not allow.
- 2: that there exists, or should exist, an ethical relationship between artists and archives.



In standard archival research, the researcher visits the archive with a destination (knowledge, item or document) in mind (Schmidt 2011). In practice-based archival research the approach is different, in that the journey, in terms of finding the unexpected (by controlled rummaging), is more desirable to achieve research aims, allowing for the unanticipated to be discovered. As Emma Cocker has stated, “Artistic practice recognises the value of not knowing, less as the preliminary state (of ignorance) preceding knowledge, but as a field of desirable indeterminacy within which to work. Not knowing is an active space within practice, wherein an artist hopes

for an encounter with something new and unfamiliar, unrecognisable or unknown.” (Fisher & Fortnum 2013, p127)

Our project explores how to reconcile the two approaches towards access (of standard and artistic ways of researching an archive), to create new ways for artists and archivists to work together productively in the development and creation of new artworks and knowledge. To do this, it is necessary for current modes of access to be overcome, through the development of trust and working relations between artists and archivists. Although there are many examples of artists working in archives such as, Bob and Roberta Smith, Mark Dion, Raqs Media Collective, Susan Hillar and of literature exploring this area, there is less cross-over of this approach into other disciplines. (*The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Merewether 2006), *The Artist in a Collected World* (Fairnington 2016), *Beyond the White Cube: Exploring Artists Interventions at the Freud Museum and Beyond* (Seigel 2017)) Furthermore it can be difficult to access material that has not been fully accessioned or catalogued, which limits the scope of the researcher’s interaction with the collection, something that is central to our approach.

Through conversations with archivists we understand that the approach we are discussing is not novel to artists, however perhaps artists are given the opportunity or the time to reveal something that other professions cannot do currently. As co-investigator Dr. Sian Vaughan states:

*“The language used in relation to commissioning artists to work with archives, that of reawakening and reanimating, is reminiscent of archival discourse on the ‘living archive’ in which an archive is inert until it is brought alive through use and opened up to possibilities. This terminology of living and waking I would argue also brings an expectation of action, of interaction, of effect and affect. Whether users or non-users of archives, the public expect artists in the archive to see things differently and to do something different, as indeed do we as archivists. It is this very assumption of difference and disruption that can function as an anticipation and expectation of affect in an encounter with art and archives. Artists are uniquely positioned to exploit and make visible the imaginary, and in doing so surface the relationship between the real and the imaginary.”* (Vaughan, 2016)

By proactively working with archivists, through a series of residencies, we will be testing the possibility to build up sufficient trust to give the artist free rein to explore the collections (Vaughan 2016). The project builds upon research undertaken previously including “How to Let an Artist Rifle Through Your Archive” and “Artists in the Archives Toolkit”. We have identified an information gap in existing toolkits that demonstrates to archives and other researchers the benefits of access methodologies common to artistic research. Through case studies *Bummock* will focus on developing a new framework for access for both researchers and archives to use in widening the scope of physical access. Which in turn could allow access and knowledge to be gained from the currently unseen or overlooked.

The **objectives** of the project are:

- 1) To generate new and alternative methodologies / protocols of access to archives for researchers and other users, from across disciplines by using research methods more akin to artistic research practice (Nelson 2013).
- 2) To develop new participative ways for researchers to access archives, such as controlled rummaging. Methods that use the physical archived material as a starting point and utilises the archivists’ knowledge of underexplored areas.
- 3) To establish exemplar working frameworks for artists and archives that ensure good, ethical and sustainable relationships are followed and that working processes and outcomes are mutually beneficial.
- 4) Give things back to the archive in terms of demonstrating ‘active’ research approach of engaging with their collections. That the process of research will give a platform for public exposure to underexposed or yet to be appreciated parts of archives.

Qualitative methodology and practice based research methods will be used to undertake the case studies and obtain data. We will use 5 case studies working within different types of archives to collate meaningful data to test the hypothesis.

**The Lace Archive (Nottingham Trent University)**



We are currently engaged in a pilot project at the Lace Archive in Nottingham Trent University where we are formulating and testing the methodology of the project. Using practice based research methods we are using our own artistic practice as the springboard to undertake the case studies in the form of artist residences within the archive. A third artist/researcher, Lucy Renton from Kingston University has been selected through a process using an advisory board. Through the whole project in five further archives we will act as a control (being present in each archive) and a different artist researcher will be selected to act as a variable, to ensure differing approaches to accessing the archive and the working processes that will be captured.

So what does this look like, through the pilot project we have formulated the following methodology we will carry through to other archives.

1. We had an initial research period (the three artists and the archivist) in the archive as a whole discovering materials through a 'controlled rummage' approach.
2. We then spent time away independently following up our own research and narrowing down our specific focus within the archive.
3. We have spent further time in the archive separately and as a group to follow up research.
4. We have developed ideas and possibilities for artwork together in two residencies - at Summer Lodge in Nottingham and hARTslane gallery in london as well as separately in our studios over 18 months.





The artworks created and research developed from the residencies will be tested and displayed in an Exhibition – Laboratory near to the archive alongside the historical artefacts and a day long symposium will be held during each Exhibition – Laboratory.

### Tennyson Research Centre (Lincoln)



We have also started an initial research visit to the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln with third artist researcher Sarah Bennett from Kingston University - to encounter the original location of the archive in the public library before it becomes housed in the County Council archive.

Access has historically been through one specific individual, and this move will formalize the nature of access to the whole collection beyond the archive holder. However, it makes the physical interaction of the archive as a whole, less straightforward. This change will allow us to directly capture the difference in approach through the experience of the archivist, as well as how the change, if any, alters our approach as users. We see a kinship between the browsing of a library and our desire for that in an archive, as Rimmer and Warwick have stated in a study; “A typical library has designed its physical space to allow its users to wander around sections and explore the contents of the open stack shelves. Many of the researchers interviewed described hours, if not days, of this browsing activity. This is achieved by becoming familiar with library environments and the activity of browsing.” (Rimmer, J. and Warwick, C et al, 2008, p12-not actual page) The study goes on to say that “the literature reports some apparently contradictory outcomes of digitisation” most significantly that, “Rather than reducing demand for accessing physical originals, digitisation has been found to increase demand for such access.” (Rimmer, J. and Warwick, C et al, 2008, p19-not actual page) Just as digital technologies have advanced, but not superseded the physical originals in archives, we also believe that there can be different methods of access that utilise the digital and traditional, but also can incorporate approaches derived from artistic research strategies.



Our project will be disseminated by the metaphor of *‘flipping the bummock’* so the unseen materials of the archive can become the tip - through the following outcomes:

- 15 new bodies of artworks, 5 each produced by both Maier and Bracey and 5 from invited artists in each of the different archives
- 5 Exhibition - Laboratories with

symposiums

- 1 final (overview) touring exhibition with conference

- 1 filmed documentary
- Journal articles and conference papers
- Research Assistant will capture and analyse the process and a PHD student will contextualize the territory.
- 1 overview publication. That identifies different approaches to how artists access archives to design a new method or structure for researchers from a variety of disciplines.

Overall, our project is concerned with finding out, of searching, of asking questions; what is that? Why is that there? What could that be? What else could that be? What is visible and known? What is not visible and known? To quote Sian Vaughan again, “In reflecting on artists’ engagement with archives, perhaps one of the key influences that the archival profession can take from artists’ practice is a reminder of the foregrounding of questions rather than answers. Artists can remind and encourage archivists to think differently.” (Vaughan 2016)

These public outputs for our project will become the visible ‘tip’ of the project, whilst much work and research will remain from view in the bummock of the project. Naturally, through the flipping of the under-seen items from the archive, through our research and artistic practice, there will also be a point where they can become the visible tip. Perhaps most of all we hope that through focusing at the entry point, the issues of access to the archive, we will unearth and expose the differences and diversities practices of how artists approach access in archives for use by other disciplines, perhaps just to remind them that there other avenues.

### **Questions for discussion/provocations:**

We know there is time for questions afterwards, but we would like to open the presentation now for a brief discussion in relation to some key specific questions we are negotiating as part of our fledgling research that your input, opinions and expertise would greatly benefit from, namely:

- What is lost of the materiality through the digital?
- How much of stored items and documents are collected but remain unseen or uncatalogued? (therefore not found on digital catalogues)
- How or what would this be in relation to the digital archival arena?
- What is the importance of material archives for artistic and other research?

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